

Message Text

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PAGE 01 COLOMB 04735 300659Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04
NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 L-03 NSC-05 PA-02
PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-15 MCT-01 CU-04 ACDA-10
TRSE-00 AGRE-00 /094 W
-----300704Z 028504 /14

P R 300550Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6433
INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

UNCLAS COLOMBO 4735

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT,CE
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER ADDRESSES NATION ON RAILWAY STRIKE

REF: COLOMBO 4725

1. PRIME MINISTER BANDARANAIKE ADDRESSED THE NATION BRIEFLY IN SEPARATE SINHALA AND ENGLISH BROADCASTS AT 1300 DECEMBER 29, IN AN OBVIOUS EFFORT TO RALLY PUBLIC SUPPORT AGAINST CURRENT CRIPPLING RAILWAY STRIKE (REFTEL).

2. SHE SAID THE STRIKE BEGAN WITH AGITATION BY A SMALL GROUP OF SHOPWORKERS AT RATMALANA WORKSHOP, DEMANDING THAT THE NORMAL FESTIVAL ADVANCE OF 100 RUPEES BE INCREASED TO 500 RUPEES. DESPITE THIS REQUEST BY A SMALL GROUP OF WORKERS, LEADERS OF ALL TRADE UNIONS AT RATMALANA SHOP, IN DISCUSSIONS WITH MINISTER OF TRANSPORT, THEMSELVES CHARACTERIZED THE DEMAND AS UNREALISTIC, AND SAID THEY WOULD BE SATISFIED WITH A 200 RUPEE ADVANCE. GOVERNMENT CAREFULLY CONSIDERED 200 RUPEE FIGURE, SINCE IF AN INCREASE WAS GIVEN TO RAILWAY, IT HAD TO BE GIVEN TO ALL OTHER WORKERS IN THE STATE SECTOR. WHILE GOVERNMENT HAD REQUEST UNDER CONSIDERATION, RATMALANA WORKSHOP EMPLOYEES WENT OUT ON STRIKE ON 15TH.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 02 COLOMB 04735 300659Z

ON THE 22ND THE CABINET APPROVED TRANSPORT MINISTER'S RECOMMENDATION FOR 200 RUPEE ADVANCE, THE FIGURE AGREED ON BY UNION LEADERS.

3. ON 22ND, HOWEVER, STRIKE SPREAD TO OTHER SECTIONS OF THE RAILWAY. ON 23RD, JOINT FRONT OF RAILWAY WORKERS

LISTED EIGHT ADDITIONAL DEMANDS, INCLUDING ONES RELATING TO RAILWAY SALARY STRUCTURE AND FOR A 5000 RUPEE LOAN TO EACH EMPLOYEE ON LIBERAL TERMS. MINISTER INVITED DISCUSSION ONLY AFTER THEY RETURNED TO WORK.

4. PM MADE POINT THAT 26,000 RAILWAY WORKERS ARE ONLY A FRACTION OF COUNTRY'S WORKERS AND ANY DEMANDS THEY MAKE CAN ONLY BE CONSIDERED IN RELATION TO REST OF ECONOMY AND STATE SERVICE. RAILWAY WORKERS RECEIVED 125 MILLION RUPEES IN ANNUAL WAGES PLUS 12 MILLION MORE IN OVERTIME AND HOLIDAY PAY. THEY GET FREE HOLIDAY WARRENTS, ADVANCES AND LOANS. ALREADY THIS YEAR 14 MILLION HAS BEEN PAID IN ADVANCES AND LOANS. GOVT DECISION TO DOUBLE FESTIVAL ADVANCES TO 200 RUPEES WILL INVOLVE AN ADDITIONAL 5 MILLION RUPEES. EXTENDING IT TO OTHER GOVT EMPLOYEES WILL AMOUNT TO 80 MILLION RUPEES. COMPARED WITH AVERAGE WORKER, RAILWAY WORKERS ARE IN FAVORABLE ECONOMIC POSITION, INCLUDING JOB SECURITY AND RETIREMENT PENSION.

5. PUBLIC HAS SUFFERED FROM STRIKE NOT ONLY BY INCONVENIENCE TO PASSENGERS BUT BY SHORTAGES OF FOOD, FUEL, FERTILIZER, RICE, KEROSENE--ALL REPORTED FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY. WE ALMOST HAD TROUBLE WITH DELIVERY OF SCHOOL EXAMINATION PAPERS, INCONVENIENCING SEVERAL THOUSAND SCHOOL CHILDREN, BUT THIS WAS AVOIDED THROUGH COOPERATION OF MANY. SITUATION IS ALSO LEADING TO BLACK-MARKETING. EXPORT CARGO MOVEMENTS ARE AFFECTED AND AVIATION AND SHIP REFUELING, RESULTING IN FOREIGN EXCHANGE LOSS AT AT TIME WHEN COST OF OIL IMPORTS IS UP.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 COLOMB 04735 300659Z

6 "I AM SORRY THAT THE PUBLIC HAVE BEEN MADE TO FACE THESE INCONVENIENCES AT A TIME WHEN THEY HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY TRADE UNION ACTION IN OTHER AREAS, SUCH AS THE SO-CALLED WORK TO RULE BY MEDICAL PERSONNEL. THE GOVERNMENT IS KEEPING THIS SITUATION ALSO UNDER CAREFUL REVIEW."

7. UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES, GOVT CANNOT SHRINK FROM ITS RESPONSIBILITY TO LOOK AFTER COMMUNITY WELFARE. "IT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE TO PERMIT A SMALL SECTION WHO ALREADY ENJOY BENEFITS, TO HOLD THE REST OF THE COUNTRY TO RANSOM." GOVT HAS ALWAYS BEEN SYMPATHETIC TO LEGITIMATE GRIEVANCES OF WORKING PEOPLE. WHATEVER WE GIVE WILL HAVE TO BE WITHIN RESOURCES AVAILABLE. GOVT HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TO RELIEVE UNEMPLOYMENT. STRIKE IS CAUSING RAILWAY ALONE LOSS OF ONE MILLION RUPEES A DAY.

8. THERE IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CONTINUANCE OF THE STRIKE IN VIEW OF GOVERNMENT'S 200 RUPEE

OFFER. PM HOPES SENSE OF REASONABLENESS WILL PREVAIL
AMONG STRIKERS AND THAT THEY WILL IMMEDIATELY RETURN
TO WORK.

9. "IF THEY CONTINUE IN THEIR STRIKE, THE GOVERNMENT,
AS IT CANNOT ALLOW THE PUBLIC TO BE INCONVENIENCED ANY
MORE, WILL HAVE NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO TAKE SUCH MEASURES
AS ARE NECESSARY TO PRESERVE LAW AND ORDER AND MAINTAIN
THE SERVICES THAT ARE ESSENTIAL FOR THE LIFE OF THE
COMMUNITY."

REED

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY, SPEECHES, RAILROADS, LABOR STRIKES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 30 DEC 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: n/a
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: n/a
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
Disposition Date: 01 JAN 1960
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976COLOMB04735
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760475-1130
From: COLOMBO
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t1976125/aaaaadmx.tel
Line Count: 126
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 COLOMBO 4725
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: morefirh
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 MAY 2004 by hattaycs>; APPROVED <05 JAN 2005 by morefirh>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: PRIME MINISTER ADDRESSES NATION ON RAILWAY STRIKE
TAGS: PINT, CE, (BANDARANAIKE, SIRIMAVO)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006